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ABSTRACT

This report discusses four studies that investigated the effects of school reform on outcomes for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The studies included evaluations of the reform and restructuring activities of schools and school districts and assessment of student outcomes and use of metal health services. One study involved 115 students in special education attending 1 of 10 rural and urban schools. Two-year follow-up data revealed statistically significant improvement in reading achievement over time, though the majority of students was still performing below expected grade levels. In another study, 23 special education students attending a school implementing a cooperative approach involving teachers, parents, and community members working together to improve outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities were compared to 24 special education students at another school. Results found fewer of the students who left the partnership school were referred to more restrictive settings than were students who left the comparison school. Although no differences in emotional functioning were found between students who left the partnership school and those students who stayed, students who left the comparison school had more problems with emotional functioning than did students who remained. The two additional studies are described. (CR)

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School Reform Efforts for Children with Emotional Disturbances and Their Families

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Introduction

The Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health is engaged in several research projects that focus on children with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are placed in special education classes within public school systems. The three efforts that focus on school reform activities and how these reform models affect outcomes for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities are: the *School and Community Study*, the *Urban School and Community Study*, and; the *Whole School Reform: Creating Environments that Work for all Children*. Furthermore, the *School, Family, and Community Partnership Study* examines the implementation of a school-based wrap-around model. This summary describes the methodology, results, and implications of these four studies.

The effects of school reform on outcomes for children who have emotional and behavioral disabilities were examined in both the *School and Community Study*, which focused on students in suburban and rural schools, and the *Urban School and Community Study*, which focused on students in urban schools. The effects of reform on students with any special education classification was the focus of *Whole School Reform: Creating Environments that Work for all Children* and the *School, Family, and Community Partnership Study* focused on the implementation of a cooperative approach involving teachers, parents, and community members working together to improve outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Methodology

Measures

These studies included evaluations of the reform and restructuring activities of schools and school districts and assessments of student outcomes and their use of mental health services. Each of these areas are discussed separately.

Measures of School Reform and Restructuring. Three of the studies used the School Reform Assessment System (SRAS) to capture the degree of district and school level reform in the six areas of governance, accountability, curriculum and instruction, "includedness," parent involvement, and pro-social discipline (see Kutash, et al., 2000). This assessment approach used interviews of multiple informants to reliably determine the degree of reform within a school.

Student Outcomes and Use of Mental Health Services. Data were collected from multiple sources to gather information regarding demographic variables, including IQ test scores; academic functioning indicators, including achievement test scores; emotional functioning indicators; and mental health services utilization as detailed in Table 1.

Student demographic information included age, race, gender, family income, and IQ. Academic functioning indicators included number of absences and discipline referrals, academic achievement in math and reading as measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test-III (WRAT-III; Wilkinson,

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Table 1
Source and Domains of Measurement

	Domains			
Source	*Demographic Information*	*Academic Functioning*	*Emotional Functioning*	*Mental Health Service Use*
Record Review	X	X		
Staff Interview				X
Parent Interview	X		X	X
Student Interview		X		

1993), and amount of time spent in various educational placements. Emotional functioning indicators included measures of psychopathology (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) and functioning using either the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS; Hodges & Wong, 1996) or the Columbia Impairment Scale (CIS; Bird, et al., 1993). Mental health services utilization was assessed by interviewing teachers regarding each student's use of mental health services during the school day, and parents, by using the Services Assessment for Children and Adolescents (SACA; Stiffman, et al., 2000).

Research Design

Longitudinal designs were used in the *School and Community Study* and the *School, Family, and Community Partnership Study* and data collection has been completed. Data collection continues for the longitudinal design of the *Whole School Reform Study*. Cross-sectional data continue to be collected for the *Urban School and Community Study*. The number of schools, participating students, and measures used in each study are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Research Design for Four Studies

	Study			
Methodology	*School and Community Study*	*Urban School and Community Study*	*Partnership Study*	*Whole School Reform Study*
Number of Participants	115	200*	47	175*
Number of Schools	10	20*	2	4
Design	Longitudinal	Point-in-time	Longitudinal	Longitudinal
Length of follow-up (in months)	24	—	18	24
Measures:				
SRAS	X	X		X
Demographics	X	X	X	X
School Indicators	X	X	X	X
Emotionality	X	X	X	
MH service use	X	X	X	

*Projected number of participants/schools at the completion of the study.

Results

The results are presented for each study except the *Whole School Reform* study, for which student data collection has not been completed. A summary of baseline data on absences, academic achievement (as measured by the WRAT-III), and psychopathology (as measured by the CBCL) for the three studies is provided in Table 3.

School and Community Study

The 115 participants were students in special education who attended one of 10 schools across the country. Most participants were male (81%) and Caucasian (79%) with a mean age of 11.6 years at the beginning of the study. The average score on an IQ test was 91.1 (*SD* = 15.4). On the CBCL-Total Problems scale, 79% of the participants had scores in the Borderline or Clinical ranges. The majority of participants had scores indicating moderate to severe levels of functional impairment on four of the six CAFAS scales with the highest proportion of severe impairment occurring in the Role Performance at School domain (Kutash, et al., 2000). Two-year follow-up data revealed statistically significant improvement in reading achievement over time, though the majority of students were still performing below their expected grade level. Similarly, indicators of emotional functioning and impairment also improved over time. School personnel reported that case management and individual counseling were the most frequently used services (Kutash, et al., 1999).

Urban School and Community Study

Data have been collected from 51 students who attended one of four schools in a large urban city. Since these schools were using various models of reform, outcomes of students from schools that used different reform models will be compared at the end of the study, when it is projected that we will have data from 20 schools and 200 students. Of the 51 students from whom data were collected, 90% were male, 80% were African-American, and the mean age was 11.2. The average score on an IQ test was 77.8 (*SD* = 12.8). On the CBCL-Total Problems scale, 59% of the students had scores in the Clinical range. Also, the majority of students (59%) scored in the Clinical range on the CIS scale of functional impairment (*M* = 18.2, *SD* = 9.5), having the most problems with behavior at school, schoolwork, and getting into trouble (Kutash, et al., 2001).

Table 3
Number of Participants, Number of Absences, WRAT-III Scores, and CBCL Scores at the Beginning of Three Studies

Study	*N*	*Days Absent (1 school year)*	*WRAT-III*[1]		*CBCL*[2] *Total Problems T-Scores*
			Reading	*Math*	
School and Community	115	12.1	86.6	86.8	67.0
Urban School and Community	51	22.3	75.2	72.6	66.5
School Partnership					
Intervention	23	11.4	86.9	87.0	62.1
Comparison	24	12.4	78.2	81.2	63.8

[1]Standard score with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 10.
[2]Scores above 63 are considered in the "clinical range."

School, Family, and Community Partnership Study

In this study, the participating special education students were compared to special education students at another school who did not participate in the Partnership. The majority of the 23 students participating in the Partnership were male (87%), Caucasian (78%), and averaged 11.7 years of age. Similar characteristics were found for the 24 students at the comparison school, with similar proportions of males (87%) and Caucasian students (87%) who were of the same average age. At the beginning of the study, before implementation of the Partnership, these students also were similar in their academic achievement in reading and math, and emotional functioning (see Table 3).

This study had attrition, as would be expected in any longitudinal study. During the course of the study, 50% of the original students from the comparison school left and 35% of the students participating in the Partnership left. Comparisons of the characteristics of the two groups of exiting students and their reasons for leaving resulted in some interesting findings. Fewer of the students who left the school that was using the Partnership were referred to more restrictive settings than were students who left the comparison school. Although no differences in emotional functioning were found between students who left the Partnership school and those students who stayed, students who left the comparison school had more problems with emotional functioning than did students who remained at this school. In addition, parents of students who left the comparison school reported less satisfaction with school services than did parents of students who stayed. These results suggest that the Partnership may have allowed students who have more impairments in emotional functioning to remain at their neighborhood school.

Discussion

A primary research focus for the Center is to examine the effects of school reform on students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and their families. Already, this series of studies has begun to document the wide array of reform activities being implemented across schools as well as characteristics of students being served in special education placements due to emotional and behavioral disabilities. The goal of these studies is to increase the knowledge of the effects of various education reform models on students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and to inform policy regarding the best reform models for special education students.

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